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IN THE WORST OF TIMES

OVERTURE TO MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG, COMPOSED BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM, ORCHESTRATION BY JONATHAN TUNICK, PERFORMED BY BROADWAY MUSICIANS, PART OF TAKE ME TO THE WORLD: A SONDHEIM 90TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION (2020), ENCOUNTERED 2020

SUBSTITUTE PLAYLIST TRACK NO. 118. LINK TO ACTUAL PERFORMANCE: HTTPS://YOUTU.BE/A92WZIVEUAW

AND SO WE come to the present day as this chapter is being written, what is by common consent one of the darkest times in our history: national, international, economic, ecological, epidemiological, political. Whatever the future may hold, as of this moment most of those who can do so are restricted to quarters to try to avoid being infected with a pandemic virus, while the economy staggers, and demonstrations rage outside, and the planet hurtles towards catastrophe.

There are many musical responses around, mostly attempts to cheer us listeners up. And heaven knows we need them. I'd single out for honorable mention *Rise Up*, performed by Andra Day (a 2015 song repurposed for a justly inspirational commercial implicitly addressing these times), and *Times Like These* (a distant-collaboration effort by a large ad hoc group of British pop stars dubbed Live Lounge Allstars). But I can point to the exact moment I encountered a piece of music that made me begin to feel a little better, and continues to do so every time I replay it.

It will go without saying to any reader who has followed me through these stories that the aspect of the current situation that has made me feel the worst is the absence of theater. As of this writing, theater seems the last thing likely to reopen, and it was the thing I had intended to focus on the most in my retirement. In the midst of this deprivation, there was a virtual benefit concert in celebration of Stephen Sondheim's 90th birthday, viewable here:

The second event in the concert (at 2:23) is an utter tour-de-force: a performance by (according to my count) 20 musicians of the wonderful Overture to *Merrily We Roll Along* – each musician in his or her own space. And unlike other spliced-together-after-the-fact collaborations between artists which have become a commonplace under current circumstances, this appears to be a real-time performance by the entire ensemble. And there is no compromise in quality of either sound or performance that I can hear; it's just an utterly professional Broadway pit orchestra doing its bang-on-time thing, nicely packaged by video experts.

It seems to bring tears to my eyes each time I play it, partly, I suppose, because, whatever the flaws in the show from which it came (only 16 performances in the original 1981 run), there is nothing at all wrong with the Overture, a thoughtful stitching-together of a few very jazzy and tuneful melodies, brilliantly orchestrated by Jonathan Tunick.

But there's a bigger reason too. The spontaneous ensemble effect is something that hitherto I would have said could only have been produced by performers interacting in the same place at the same time. And I would have been wrong. And then, if I was wrong about that kind of limitation, what more might also be attainable while we await whatever kind of normality finally returns? So this number provides a solid little precedent upon which hopefulness can legitimately be built. Maybe we can do more than we think, even under current circumstances.

I have never given in to despair. I have never lost my innate conviction that we as a nation, a people, and a planet will get through somehow. True, we'll never be able to say that we've fully done it. But perhaps we'll be able to lay claim to accomplishing a meaningful chunk of the task. I still think there's a good chance that I'll live to see at least that much, but no one can even tell me that for sure. At this age, I know that my window of opportunity to see better times is far narrower than it was in the years I have mostly written about here. All the more reason, then, that I seize hungrily on any grounds for hopefulness.

And in light of that and other encouragement, I, and we, go on.